

## Dissidences

Hispanic Journal of Theory and Criticism

---

Volume 4  
Issue 8 *Reconciliation and its Discontents*

Article 12

---

November 2012

### Welcome to Our Hillbrow: Learning to “learn to live” in the wake of apartheid

Maurits van Bever Donker  
*University of Minnesota*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/dissidences>

---

#### Recommended Citation

van Bever Donker, Maurits (2012) "Welcome to Our Hillbrow: Learning to “learn to live” in the wake of apartheid," *Dissidences*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 8 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/dissidences/vol4/iss8/12>

This Article / Artículo is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Bowdoin Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissidences by an authorized editor of Bowdoin Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [mdoyle@bowdoin.edu](mailto:mdoyle@bowdoin.edu).

---

## Welcome to Our Hillbrow: Learning to “learn to live” in the wake of apartheid

### Keywords / Palabras clave

Reconciliation, Memory, South Africa, Politican Violence

# DISSIDENCE

Hispanic Journal of Theory and Criticism

Welcome to Our Hillbrow:  
*Learning to “learn to live”  
in the wake of apartheid*

Mauritz van Bever Donker / University of Minnesota

“Each book is a pedagogy aimed at forming its reader”

(Derrida, “Learning to live finally” 31)

The work of coming to terms with the legacy of apartheid, to live in its wake, exceeds the demand to both memorialize the violences of that project (maintaining its weight in the present)

while simultaneously attempting to open an alternate trajectory (one not weighed down by its weight), which would register a future that is always already and yet still to come. In short, it exceeds the call to offer a relation to history characterized by the folding of mourning and melancholia. Such a project, which is argued for by Sam Durrant in Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning, while operating on a necessary level nonetheless requires the maintenance of the constitutive terrain of apartheid and, as such, overlooks the shift brought about in this terrain; particularly in the realm of the literary. A shift, precisely, that renders problematic the terms of any straightforward project of reconciliation understood in the racialised language of apartheid. It is the inability to see this shift, what Althusser in arguing for a project of “symptomatic reading” terms the invisible in the visible (Cf. “From Capital to Marx’s philosophy”), which has tended to mark the readings of Phaswane Mpe’s Welcome to Our Hillbrow as either an “invention” of a mourning of a particular type (Durrant, “The invention of mourning in post-apartheid literature”) or as a recovery of community from the threat of the “postmodern” (Clarkson, “Locating Identity in Phaswane Mpe’s Welcome to Our Hillbrow”).

Durrant’s argument, unlike that of Clarkson, is in its general thrust difficult to resist. Whereas Clarkson argues that what is at stake in Mpe’s novel (and by extension in post-apartheid literature more generally) is the rescuing of “traditional culture” from the threatened disintegration of community (“Locating Identity” 456) ironically understood through a Lockean concept of propertied relation (“Locating Identity” 453) [1], Durrant posits the invention of mourning as an abiding without memorialization as a response to the violences of apartheid (“The invention of mourning” 443). In the logic of his Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning, the Derridean project of “learning to live with ghosts” is embraced by Durrant along

with the implications of a dislocated subjectivity and an always already deferred community (10, 51, 114). However, in an attempt to resist the declaration of the end of “the innocent essential black subject” which he associates with Stuart Hall as a move that “risks losing sight of the realities of racism” (Postcolonial Narration 112), Durrant argues for a simultaneous valorization of racial identity which is perhaps most clearly articulated in his discussions of Toni Morrison. While the ethical concern which informs this double move is necessary, it is also precisely only one level [2]. What I locate as being at stake in Durrant’s move is precisely the maintenance of the constitutive terrain of apartheid, namely, modernity understood as a subjective condition (a modernity which Durrant himself argues through a reading of Spivak’s Critique of Postcolonial Reason is precisely constituted through a “primary act of exclusion” (Postcolonial Narration 6) constitutive with the emergence of colonialism and expressed in a language of race) and, as such, keeping the constitutive differences of this modernity in play: for Durrant it is a question of black and white, Europe and its others, the formulation of a “new humanism” (Postcolonial Narration 12) [3]. The implication, against Durrant’s intention, is that this learning to live with ghosts is turned in his text toward a valorization of the unified, humanist, calculable subject who must welcome these ghosts.

In contrast to Durrant’s argument, the refrain which structures Mpe’s text, namely “welcome to our Hillbrow”, offers to the reader a sense of a shifting terrain so as to open a possibility for coming to terms with the legacy of apartheid. More particularly, in Mpe’s text this refrain is articulated in relation to the cut of the body as an organizing concept that cannot simply be reduced to a memory of violence; it is not simply a “ghost”. Rather, the body which is always already “here” (as a spacing) becomes indispensable to thought as that which orders (in the sense of both demanding and shaping, or more pointedly, of shaping through demanding) in the

tactility of its cuts the clearing of a space in which and through which the new might be produced: a production not an invention precisely because through this ordering, the body as cut (this is not a question of presence) is folded into the new as a cutting that disallows the return of the same. The refrain, in relation to this cut of the body, registers the shift that takes place in the concepts of community and indigeneity (both formative concepts for apartheid), offering itself as a pedagogical act through which we might learn to learn to live in the wake of apartheid.

It is in this learning to learn that a project resonant with that of reconciliation is located. To be clear, this project is resistant to any expression of reconciliation that takes as its point of departure a demand for minority rights or the legal offering of amnesty, a device that assigns blame while removing guilt so as to inoculate the emergent future of the nation from the apparent dangers of a redemptive politics: in short, it resists the guarantee of progress through reform. Rather, resisting this amnesia through the cut of the body, this project offers an expression of reconciliation that carries that name as a marker of its taking place in the wake of apartheid but that does not express its terms: reconciliation through the marking of a shifting terrain, the production of the new [4].

Welcome to Our Hillbrow, then, is a narrative which appears at a first reading to be structured around the deaths of all its main characters, a reading which has earned it the label of a work of mourning. However, the refrain which forms the title of the novel calls for a different reading. Resisting the temptation to read the refrain in an ironic tone as implying a somewhat deficient offer of welcome, its integrity abides in the new terrain that it signifies. It is important to note here, before discussing the work of the cut of the body, indigeneity and community in Mpe's

novel, that this new terrain is not simply an alternate concept latent in the text of modernity. This new terrain does not, in any ontological sense, yet exist: the refrain calls for its materialization as a production.

From the opening of the novel it is clear that the reader is invited into a conversation through which the characters are offered the possibility of learning to learn to live differently [5]. This is not a question of a personal responsibility (hence the anxiety that marks Clarkson's reading of this novel), rather it is a question of the gift of a life not stamped into the image of modernity, a gift which in the strict sense is not readily available for living. This first chapter of the novel, entitled "Hillbrow: the Map", sets out two very different expressions of Hillbrow. The first of these follows the form of what we might term cartography and statistics, setting out the parameters of Hillbrow in terms of surface area, population density, and crime (1-5): in short, in the language of the state. While the second traces the movements of Refentše on his first encounter with Hillbrow, plotting a traversal of the neighborhood which pays attention to alternate trajectories (to parties, prostitutes, the store) while marking the route he will regularly tread up until the time of his suicide (7-16).

The difference registered in these two approaches to Hillbrow is not simply relativist, a difference of perspective between subjects. This difference is also registered in the tone of conversations that the narrator recounts so as to give the reader a bearing on Refentše. These conversations, which would focus on "crime and grime" as well as the scourge of HIV/AIDS, are narrated in two different styles: the first begins from a position of belonging, or indigeneity, calculating responsibility for "moral decay" as resting entirely on those "black foreigners" or "makwerekwere" who corrupt the purity of the local community (17, 23). The second is folded along the lines of the cut of the body through the narration of a series of encounters: the death of

a child knocked down during the celebrations of the national team's victory registered only in the language of a cry (2); an expression of apartheid violence that displayed "many writers, politicians . . . and the endless string of South Africans hanging and jumping from their ninth floor prison cells . . . the latter was called Learning to Fly" which is joined to the violence of "black police and security forces hitting fellow blacks" (19); the discovery of Lerato in bed with Sammy (Refentše's closest friend) (25); Refentše's journey ending "in the blank wall of suicide" (25). All of these encounters posit the body within the ambivalence of its cuts (the body itself is not narrated, it is registered as a cut which cuts) as that which undoes the narrative of indigeneity, community, and calculated responsibility; in other words, what this difference of expression which becomes registered in the cut of the body offers is a point of view that renders the subject relative in itself, resistant to the totalisation of personal responsibility and the language of the state [6].

As the interaction between the short story that Refentše pens in the novel and the life of Refilwe (a former lover of Refentše's) makes plain, this terrain which is marked by movement and points of view where the subject is an effect not locatable within the discourses of modernity and is not available to calculation [7], is not constituted through a simple lack of responsibility and indigeneity; it is not a void. Refentše's short story, which deals with "Hillbrow, Xenophobia and AIDS and the prejudices of rural lives" (55), narrates the final years of a young Sepedi woman who is rejected from her local community due to being diagnosed HIV positive. Finding it an impossibility to simply remove herself from any ties to her community (its claim travels in her "consciousness", 55) she gives herself to the task of writing "as a sanctuary from the lashing tongues of Tiragalong" (58). However, her short story, which similarly dealt with the "imponderables" of xenophobia, prejudice, and AIDS, was rejected by publishers for not being



“euphemistic enough” for a work not written in English, a judgment that Refentše likens to the Immorality Act and the function of the Bantustans during apartheid (57). The woman of Refentše’s fiction registers this double rejection in her body, wasting away so as to take on the likeness of a “scarecrow woman” (58) [8].

The juxtaposition of this story with that of the character of Refilwe accentuates the manner in which Mpe’s novel departs from the trajectory of Refentše’s short story. Refilwe pursues her tertiary studies and finds employment as an editor at a South African publishing house. However, she is unable to allow literature written in Sepedi to be published due to the need to secure school text book orders (94). After a number of years Refilwe travels to England to pursue a Masters degree at Oxford University (98) and it is when she arrives at Heathrow that a decisive shift takes place, a shift which does not offer easy resolutions. Refilwe discovers that due to her status as a South African she does not need to pass through the extra security checks and scrutiny. Ostensibly this privileged treatment is attributed to the figure of Nelson Mandela and the “miracle” that he facilitated in the peaceful general elections of 1994 (100), a transition that the narrator makes clear marks South Africans in the view of the English as a part of “our white civilization”, a position which is denied to other Africans (101). What is at stake here is not the declaration that prejudice and xenophobia are global phenomena, rather through registering Refilwe’s inclusion at the level of “our white civilization” it is suggested that this prejudice and xenophobia are symptoms of the condition of modernity [9].

This diagnosis is not, however, offered as a conclusion on the matter. While in Oxford Refilwe discovers that she is also HIV positive. According to the diagnosis Refilwe did not contract the disease from her Nigerian partner whom she met at a pub in Oxford; neither did she contract the disease while she was living in Oxford. Rather, Refilwe is informed that she “must

have been infected for a decade or so” (117), while she was more than likely still living in her rural village of Tiragalong. The effect of this diagnosis is not to support the myth which the narrator indicates as prevalent in Britain that HIV and AIDS comes from Africa (100), but rather to resist the notion that any coming to terms with the legacy of apartheid can be easily achieved through a politics of blame (a politics often expressed through a language of reconciliation in the common sense). Refilwe returns home, to Tiragalong, so as to die among “those who loved her still” (116) of a disease which the narrator uses to set out a diagnosis of that community (as an expression of modernity). As the narrator informs us, in Refilwe’s mind she returned, having “turned into the scarecrow woman of Refentše’s fiction” (120).

The narration of Refilwe’s return to South Africa is threaded with the assertion that she will “very soon . . . be joining Refentše, Lerato . . . and the others in the World of our Heaven” (113) – an encounter which it is suggested will be marked by an intention to turn “their spoken and unspoken thoughts into written fictions and poems” (113). This intention to write, which remains only an intention, is articulated as a response to the experience of reading/listening as the form of the narrative’s articulation: the characters, particularly Refentše, all encounter the lives associated with their bodies as narrated to them as an encounter with community. No longer constituting an attempt to escape the violence of community and indigeneity as an expression of modernity, the intention to write is a realization of the becoming “makwerekwere” (outsider) of the subject, an inclination to the outside [10]. It is on the terrain that is constituted by this encounter that the refrain “welcome to our Hillbrow” should be read, and on which any meaningful project resonant with reconciliation must take place.

The possibility of welcome that is offered through the refrain “welcome to our Hillbrow” is lodged precisely through shifting the sense by which the words “our Hillbrow” might be read. In other words, it does not go far enough to simply argue that the status of the terms “Hillbrow” and “our” have been problematised, thereby rendering them unavailable to a politics of community and indigeneity that Mpe’s novel argues characterizes the post-apartheid. This much is easily deducible from the manner in which the term “Hillbrow” slides variously into new Hillbrow, Alexandra and Johannesburg, to England, the world of our humanity, and finally to “our All” (104) and “our Heaven ...” (124). The shifting signifier here clearly places into question, at a certain level, what might be signified by either the naming of community through place, on the one hand, or, on the other, the specification of the pronoun “our”. In contrast to this, I have argued that the terrain (or sense) on which the phenomenon of “our Hillbrow” might be read has shifted. What is named through the designation of community through place in Mpe’s text is not a slippage into indiscernability but rather the mode through which community as excess, as a movement towards and encounter with the outside, resists calculation and specification. Indigeneity, on this terrain, shifts from an expression of belonging and ownership that would keep community and its subjects in place, to an expression of movement that simultaneously holds on to the cut of the body as its condition of possibility and as that which cuts it loose. This welcome, however, is not a call toward something that is already constituted as such; it is not a way out as though we could simply come to terms with the legacy of apartheid or get outside of it. Rather, it is a welcoming to a lesson, a pedagogical moment resonant with a new articulation of reconciliation that enables an opening in which this new sense of indigeneity and community might be produced through what I have termed: the cut of the body.

## Notes

The financial assistance of the National Research Foundation (NRF) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the NRF. I would also like to acknowledge the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape for providing the space and critical feedback that allowed me to write this paper.

[1] Naming this oversight as ironic is a euphemism at best. The ambivalence at play in an assertion of “traditional African community” coupled with an assertion of community as being constituted through property relations – the very basis through which the “native” in Locke’s Second Treatise of Government is excluded from society and the basis through which colonization was justified (the principle of vacant land) – brings into view the extent to which the terrain upon which apartheid and the post-apartheid is evaluated has been maintained.

[2] To consider this a level is not to dismiss it as a concern. Rather, while acknowledging that at some point a more determined political position with specific outcomes must be assumed, to lodge this at the level of the explicitly political (in other words, within the terms of the political which precisely make such a position necessary) masks the extent to which that politics assumes a particular ground, a ground which we might want to shift (Cf. Derrida, “Terror, Religion, and the New Politics” 5).

[3] That this question of a “new humanism” works to re-inscribe the subject within the terms of Europe has been argued by Franz Fanon in his Black Skin, White Masks which opens with a scathing critique of this tendency whose expression was found in the valorization of a lost black identity, an expression that Fanon diagnosed as a sickness (xii) and which he spends the

remainder of his text demonstrating. It is this argument which leads Fanon in The Wretched of the Earth to call for us to “leave this Europe where they are never done talking of man, yet murder men everywhere they find them . . .” (251, emphasis mine), in the hope of a humanity of encounters which resists an imitation of that Europe (Wretched 254). In the South African context, Steve Biko argued that this valorization of being Black in relation to White was an embrace of the designation “non-white”, it was a marker that the terrain had not yet shifted (Cf. Gordon, “A Phenomenology of Biko’s Black Consciousness”). Stated differently, for Biko to be black “is not a matter of pigmentation – being black is a reflection of a mental attitude” (Steve Biko, “Definition of Black Consciousness” 52).

[4] Jeremy Cronin, in his poem “Even the Dead”, offers a very provocative reading of the connections between amnesty (as an element of reconciliation) and amnesia as an expression that resists what he names, following Benjamin’s Theses on the Philosophy of History, a politics of redemption. Redemption, for Cronin, is the struggle to stay awake, to resist the simple pull of progress that actually maintains the grounds of apartheid.

[5] The opening line of the novel addresses Refentše, the main character, with a conditional premised on his previous life “If you were still alive . . .” (1). This initial address becomes quite heavily complicated (especially for any straightforward reading of mourning) as the narrator offers a less finite reading of the events of Refentše’s life that, he is told, would have altered how he lived, and actively do alter his and his compatriots’ current existence. One such encounter occurs in the “courtyard of heaven” between Refentše, Lerato (Refentše’s lover, who committed suicide primarily due to the effect of his suicide), and Refentše’s mother who had been necklaced (suffocated through having a burning tire placed around one’s head, Cf. Moosage, “The Impasse of Violence” for a reading of necklacing as an expression of violence during the struggle against

apartheid) due to an accusation of witchcraft being directed at her due to Refentše's suicide.

Here, after the concepts of community, responsibility and indigeneity had been exposed by the narrator as an inadequate instrumental reason; the three encounter each other, face to face, as it were: "You [Refentše] watched your mother's eyes contracting. They scrutinized Lerato from the feet, slowly moving up until they reached the level of her eyes. Your mother fixed a long stare there. And a gentle smile announced itself" (Welcome 70). This encounter, lodged outside of the strictures of community, leads to the disclosure that it is the violence of community understood through the lens of indigeneity that has obscured the openness of a welcome.

[6] This move resonates strongly with Deleuze's reading of the fold in Leibniz (Cf. Deleuze, The Fold, particularly part 1). It is also this shifting to a point of view that I would argue is expressed in the image of Benjamin's "angel of history". While this is also for Benjamin a question of memory, the arrest of the dialectic seems to offer a point of view that perhaps offers the possibility of what Deleuze and Guattari would call a line of flight. What is crucial in the case of both Benjamin and Mpe, and which I think the Deleuzian project would benefit from, is that this point of view stems from and incorporates in it the violences of modernity.

[7] Modernity, for the purposes of this essay, is taken as specifying a subjective condition constituted through the foundational discourses of colonialism and apartheid. Spivak's Critique of Postcolonial Reason and Mbembe's On the Postcolony set out the terms through which this condition is philosophically produced. As I argue above, it is this condition that Fanon confronts in Black Skin, White Masks. That calculability, both the ability to calculate as well as (and perhaps more crucially) the availability to calculation, to a reduction to one, is an integral element in this modern subjectivity is very clearly set out in Deleuze and Guattari's Thousand Plateaus, especially in the "Treatise on Nomadology".

[8] That colonialism worked to produce a similar quasi-human condition in “the native”, producing the native as not quite animal and not quite man is not incidental (Cf. Fanon, Wretched of the Earth 28, 32)

[9] As Aimé Césaire formulates it in his Discourse on Colonialism, “. . . a nation which colonizes, that civilization which justifies colonization—and therefore force—is already a sick civilization” (39). The effects of this sickness, which Césaire argues expressed itself in Europe as fascism, are what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (established as a necessary element of the reform of the apartheid system), according to Durrant, failed to deal with at the level of the individual (“The invention of mourning in post-apartheid literature” 442). As an effort to come to terms with the legacy of apartheid, as a learning to learn to live in its wake, Mpe’s novel registers a shift in relation to modernity (as a condition) that offers an opening through which a life might be produced as such.

[10] This inclination to the outside is very close to the productivity that Foucault locates in the work of Blanchot, which he articulates as “the Being of Language”, Cf. Foucault, “The Thought of the Outside”

## **Works Cited**

Althusser, Louis and Étienne Balibar. Reading Capital. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: Verso, 2009. Print.

Biko, Steve. “Definition of Black Consciousness”. Ed. Aelred Stubbs C.R. Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2004. Print.

Césaire, Aimé. Discourse on Colonialism. Trans. Joan Pinkham. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000. Print.

Clarkson, Carol. "Locating Identity in Phaswane Mpe's Welcome to Our Hillbrow". Third World Quarterly 26.3 (2005): 451-459. Academic Search Premier. Web. 22 March, 2010.

Cronin, Jeremy. Even the Dead: Poems, Parables & A Jeremiad. Cape Town: David Philip Publishers and University of the Western Cape: Mayibuye Books, 1997. Print.

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. Print.

Derrida, Jacques. "Terror, Religion, and the New Politics". Ed. Richard Kearney. Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers. Ireland: Fordham University Press, 2004. Print.

---. Living to Live Finally: The Last Interview. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Pelgrave MacMillan, 2007. Print.

Durrant, Sam. Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J.M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison. Albany: State University of New York, 2004. Print.

---. "The Invention of Mourning in Post-Apartheid Literature". Third World Quarterly 26.3 (2005): 441-450. Academic Search Premier. Web. 22 March, 2010.

Fanon, Frantz. Black Skin, White Masks. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2008. Print.

---. The Wretched of the Earth. Trans. Constance Farrington. Penguin Books, 1969. Print.



Foucault, Michel. "Maurice Blanchot: The Thought of the Outside", Foucault/Blanchot. Trans.

Jeffrey Mehlman and Brian Massumi. New York: Zone Books, 1987. Print.

Gordon, Lewis, R. "A Phenomenology of Biko's Black Consciousness". Eds. Andile

Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander, and Nigel C. Gibson. Biko Lives! Contesting the

Legacies of Steve Biko. Palgrave MacMillan, 2008. Print.

Locke, John. The Second Treatise of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration,

Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 2002. Print.

Mbembe, Achille. On the Postcolony, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. Print

Moosage, Riedwaan. "The Impasse of Violence: writing necklacing into a history of the

liberation struggle in South Africa". Diss. U of the Western Cape, 2010. Print.

Mpe, Phaswane. Welcome to our Hillbrow, Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2001.

Print

Spivak, Gayatri, C. A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing

Present, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999. Print.